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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000673

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SUBJECT: GOR ON MARCH 18 TRANSNISTRIA 2 PLUS 1 TALKS

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Russian Transnistria Conflict Negotiator Valeriy Nesterushkin told us that the March 18 statement signed by Presidents Medvedev, Voronin, and Transnistrian leader Smirnov contained "neutralized" points drawn from all three sides' draft statements. Stressing that the statement supported the 5 plus 2 format of future talks, Nesterushkin said there were no plans for future talks in any format until the April 5 Moldovan elections were over, after which an April 8 OSCE-led 3 plus 2 meeting would discuss restarting the 5 plus 2 talks. Other formats remained possible. Nesterushkin said the statement's call for transformation of the peacekeeping forces into an OSCE-led peace-guaranteeing force repeated a Putin-Yushchenko agreement from December 2005, but was now accepted by the conflict parties themselves. He urged the U.S. to nominate a new Transnistria negotiator in Washington, and lamented the interruption of bilateral U.S.-Russia talks on conflict settlement after the Georgia crisis. Analysts' views of the statement were lackluster, calling it "symbolic" and doubting Russia's intentions in resolving the conflict. End Summary.

Signed Statement

¶2. (C) Russian Special Negotiator for the Transnistria Conflict Valeriy Nesterushkin told us on March 19 that the March 18 2 plus 1 talks between President Medvedev, Moldovan President Voronin, and Transnistrian leader Smirnov in Barvikha near Moscow were only a "small step" toward resolving the Transnistria conflict. Nesterushkin said that the resulting statement was essentially a "bilateral document," despite Medvedev's signature as a third party. The text of the statement is reported below in para 11.

¶3. (C) After an initial one-on-one with Voronin, which also covered bilateral issues such as Moscow's promise to deliver 50,000 tons of fuel oil to Moldova, the two countries' delegations discussed Transnistria, followed by a one-on-one between Medvedev and Smirnov. Only then did the 2 plus 1 talks commence. Nesterushkin elaborated that all three sides presented their own draft statements, precipitating a four hour-long process of agreeing upon "neutralized" points drawn from each draft that did not favor any side.

Point 3: Future talks

¶4. (C) Although point 3 of the March 18 statement affirmed the parties' desire to restart the 5 plus 2 talks, Nesterushkin said that the format and timing of future talks was not discussed. Referring to the upcoming April 5 elections in Moldova and the uncertainty of who would be the authorized Moldovan representative for the Transnistrian settlement, Nesterushkin said the only signpost was a 3 plus 2 (OSCE, Russia, Ukraine plus the U.S. and EU as observers)

meeting planned by the OSCE for April 8, which would assess the post-election situation and reviving the 5 plus 2 talks.

¶5. (C) Nesterushkin insisted that point 3 of the statement underscored that the 2 plus 1 format was not meant to supplant the 5 plus 2 process, although he allowed that future talks could take an "innovative" approach, and consist of a mix of formats. There were no immediate plans for another 2 plus 1 round of talks, again due to the elections.

¶6. (C) Nesterushkin clarified that Smirnov's call for further talks "before the end of March" referred to a bilateral meeting with Voronin as agreed to during their December 24, 2008 meeting, which stood apart from any future multilateral talks. Smirnov's comments that Transnistria still strove for independence were predictable and showed that the mediators and observers still had a lot of work to do, Nesterushkin added.

Point 4: Transformation of Peacekeeping Forces

¶7. (C) Nesterushkin specified that point four of the March 18 statement, calling for the transformation of the Russian-led peacekeeping force into a peace-guaranteeing operation under OSCE auspices after the settlement of the conflict was "nothing new," as it had been proclaimed in December 2005 by Ukrainian President Yushchenko and then-President Putin. However, Nesterushkin noted that the acceptance of this transformation by the conflict parties in the March 18 statement did constitute a new development.

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Smirnov in particular had been very resistant to accepting the point.

¶8. (C) Nesterushkin went on to criticize calls to change the format of the peacekeeping forces before the conflict was settled. Stating that the Russian presence had so far guaranteed unprecedented stability and lack of violence, he pointed to similarities in mentality and common language as reasons for Russia's success.

Call for U.S. participation

¶9. (C) Noting that he would meet OSCE Ambassador Philip Remler March 20, Nesterushkin's Ukrainian counterpart March 23, the EU in early-mid April, and would participate in the OSCE-organized 3 plus 2 meeting on April 8, Nesterushkin called for the U.S. to nominate its own representative in Washington as soon as possible, in order to fully participate in the reenergized settlement process. He also lamented that regular bilateral U.S.-Russia consultations on Transnistria had been interrupted after the Georgian conflict.

Observers unimpressed

¶10. (U) Initial reactions to the talks have been lackluster. Moskovskiy Komsomolets called the declaration "ritual;" Gazeta termed it "symbolic," but a boost to the Moldovan Communist Party's popularity in the elections. Alexei Makarin of the Center for Political Technologies saw no chance of settlement as long as Transnistria strove for independence, while Igor Botan from the Moldovan Adept think tank was quoted in the Moscow Times saying that, thanks to the statement, Russia had preserved its troops' presence in the region "for an indefinite period." Kommersant quoted a member of Voronin's entourage saying Russia had no interest in "giving away" Transnistria as long as Ukraine stood a chance of joining NATO, and suggested Moscow's mediation efforts made all statements of support for the 5 plus 2

format a "mockery of the other mediators."

Unofficial Translation of Joint Statement

¶11. (U) (note internal numbering)

The leadership of the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria, hereinafter referred to as the Parties, meeting in Moscow on March 18, 2009, in the presence of the Russian Federation, expressing pleasure that peace has been successfully maintained on the Dniester for many years, and guided by the desire to resolve the Transnistrian conflict by peaceful political means, have agreed on the following:

¶1. The Parties will continue direct contacts for the purpose of stepping up the negotiation process with respect to a political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.

¶2. The Parties will intensify the work of the expert groups aimed at developing confidence-building measures and cooperation in the Dniester region in the socio-economic and humanitarian fields.

¶3. The Parties reaffirm the importance of the "Ongoing meeting on political issues within the framework of the negotiating process regarding a Transnistrian settlement" (the 5 plus 2 format) and will create the conditions for the expeditious resumption of work in this format, in the first half of 2009 if possible. The Parties call on all the participants in the 5 plus 2 format to assist in creating such conditions.

¶4. The Parties note the stabilizing role of the current peacekeeping operation in the region and deem it advisable to transform it into a peace-guaranteeing operation under OSCE auspices, as a result of the Transnistrian settlement.

¶5. The Parties express their gratitude to the Russian federation for its efforts as an intermediary to promote the search for a sustainable and comprehensive version of a Transnistrian settlement.

(Signed) Voronin, Smirnov, Medvedev
BEYRLE